

Observations on Political Ideology in Complex Societies in the Tropics-and Elsewhere.

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[Helms, Mary W.](#) "Observations on Political Ideology in Complex Societies in the Tropics-and Elsewhere." *Archeological Papers of the American Anthropological Association*. 9.1 (2008): 195-200. DOI: 10.1525/ap3a.1999.9.1.195

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Abstract:

A number of related themes are teased from the diverse essays composing this volume. The question of whether or not “the tropics” constitutes a unique setting for anthropological investigation is also briefly visited. The paper concludes with discussion of the basic ideological concept underlying the issue of political legitimacy in complex polities.

Keywords: anthropology | political ideology | complex societies | the tropics | anthropological investigation | political legitimacy

Article:

In recent years long-standing issues concerning the nature of social and political complexity and institutionalized status inequality in prehistoric and ethnohistoric non-industrial societies have been revisited (e.g., Price and Feinman 1995). A number of previously accepted theoretical approaches and assumptions have been questioned and found either to lack adequate validation or to be, in themselves insufficient as explanations for such phenomena (e.g., Roosevelt, McIntosh, this volume). Broadly stated, investigation of how hierarchical societies and/or centralized polities have developed and operated is expanding from an emphasis on vertical hierarchies to consideration of other modes of complex organization and from a focus on select ecological factors as primary mechanisms underlying change and adaptation to recognition of more diversified and "actor-centered" social and political processes. Concurrently, interpretations of such processes have focused greater attention on how political ideology may condition political economy in the overall operation of society in general and inform the pursuit and exercise of more specific political affairs.

The papers presented in this volume address such issues as they pertain to a variety of organizationally complex polities (especially so-called chiefdoms and states) that developed in

environmental conditions characteristic of tropical areas of the world. In doing so the authors, sometimes singly and certainly in the aggregate, not only consider individual issues of hierarchy and centralization, ecology and political economy as these may be (perhaps) uniquely expressed in equatorial regions but also discuss aspects of the ideological or cosmological “environment” that go well beyond conditions of tropical ecology per se and emphasize certain aspects of political life that are not dependent particular ecological settings and thus are applicable to other regions of the world as well.

Selecting the tropics as the focus of the essays in this volume immediately raises the basic issue of whether “the tropics” legitimately constitutes a distinct theatre for anthropological investigation. Refuting any general tendency to think of the tropics as having a unified physical setting, Jane Allen describes the considerable environmental heterogeneity characteristic of Peninsular Malaysia and Susan McIntosh recounts the great diversity of environments encountered in the African Tropics. Yet McIntosh also notes the long-established tendency to stereotype the tropics as lushly vegetated, hot, and steamy places characteristically distinct in both environmental and cultural forms from conditions in the temperate zone. Her comments should be well attended, for they provide a cautionary note lest “the tropics” become unduly reified as a separate investigative world with its own unique cultural dynamics set apart, for better or for worse, from conditions found in more temperate regions. Indeed, Elizabeth Graham, sensitive to cultural and historical contrasts between Old World and New World tropical conditions, suggests that a certain invidious, prejudicial identification and labeling of the tropics has already occurred within the Western temperate world as a result of a number of historical conditions, including the geo-political dominance of northern temperate zone societies over tropical peoples and places, distinctive Victorian attitudes and experiences of these northern colonial powers, and theories of cultural evolution that have not appreciated tropical conditions as such. Pursuing this theme, Graham also asks whether there really is such a thing as “tropical” ecology given that the rules behind the relational dynamics that define ecology are universal, although the outcome of specific ecological processes or relationships may vary regionally and/or conditionally.

In contrast to arguments questioning a unique privileging or stereotyping of things tropical, several authors have commented on a number of distinctive environmentally-related conditions that may have particular salience especially for the humid tropics. Elisabeth Bacus mentions how the great diversity of plant and animal species is thinly spread in narrow ecological niches while Anna Roosevelt comments on the diversity and plenitude of food provided by tropical floodplains. John Miksic notes that there seem to have been fewer early cities in the tropics and, in a related issue, reminds us that there are significant health conditions that make tropical medicine a specialty in its own right. Elizabeth Graham asks that we look beyond the landscape concepts and building methods and materials characteristic of the Western temperate world to better appreciate the particular ways of delineating domestic space sans roofs and/or walls and the distinctive management of greenspace characteristic of settlements in many tropical settings.

In addition, water and water-related issues, discussed by several authors, may constitute one of the most distinctive and important factors in a particularly tropical human ecology. Roosevelt speaks of water-related flora and fauna as contributing in a major way to the large, stable, relatively sedentary prehistoric societies of the lower Amazon, while Miksic opines that having access to sufficient quantity of water, as much as concern with unique problems of water quality, directly influences human settlement pattern and population density in tropical regions. At this point, however, our understanding of life in the tropics, at least where water is concerned, must broaden beyond technical and managerial aspects of water control to recognize the symbolic and ideological importance accorded water by native societies. In this spirit Miksic not only addresses the construction of wells, canals, and water tanks necessary to supply the physical and material needs of a dense urban population at Trowulan in medieval Java but also recognizes the religious importance of such waterworks. The large reservoir near the center of the urban zone, he suggests, was not originally intended to supply a quantity of water to a growing populace but rather was constructed as a ritual and symbolic setting for water as a holy substance with life-giving properties and qualities of fertility. In Miksic's opinion, construction of such reservoirs for holy water inadvertently made denser urban settlement practical by making sheer quantity of water available, too.

Java was not unique in this respect. Lisa Lucero also addresses both the ideological potency and the economic and demographic significance of water management in Classic Lowland Maya political life, arguing that not only control of stored supplies of drinking water during seasonal drought but also, and even more important, the need to direct water-related fertility and purification rituals underwrote elite authority in Mayan polities. These managerial activities went beyond health-related issues associated with water storage to further associate Mayan elite themselves with themes of power and purity symbolically encapsulated in the ecological and perhaps psychotropic qualities of the water lily.

Access to water in the Mayan lowlands necessitated seasonal population nucleation around major ritual centers, like Tikal. Relating political elites to concentrations of population for any length of time would seem automatically to imply that aristocratic authority resides in the control of people, their labor and/or the tributary fruits of that labor, as McIntosh has indicated with reference to West Africa and Robertshaw for western Uganda. While recognizing that some degree of control over labor and/or tribute may have been part of the activation of Mayan aristocratic authority, Lucero nonetheless emphasizes that the dry season population concentration at centers like Tikal may have corresponded with, and facilitated, intensive political-ideological activity involving public display of water-related rituals and a variety of other symbols and activities expressive of aristocratic grace. These public events bespoke the superior status of the elite and tangibly evidenced their exclusive and rightful access to higher supernatural realms, thereby associating Mayan rulership, like that of Javanese states, with cosmologically- as well as aquatically- defined concepts of purity and power.

Elsa Redmond, Rafael Gasson and Charles Spencer also describe regional settlement hierarchies focusing on paramount centers in their discussion of pre-Hispanic chiefdoms of the western plains of Venezuela. Their discussion includes mention of the elevated earthen causeways that were constructed to facilitate travel and transport across terrain that is seasonally inundated and that provided access to drained agricultural fields. Redmond, Gasson and Spencer also describe how the causeways connected outlying settlements with politically dominant regional centers that were the focus of the radiating causeways. Allen recounts how, in much the same way, vital waterways connected river headwater groups with coastal trading centers of Kedah in Malaysia and Peter Robertshaw describes a network of broad roads connecting all parts of the 19th century Buganda to the capital. In all these cases, rivers, roads, and causeways facilitated transportation of goods and people and encouraged exchange of information between regional political centers and an outlying populace that may have been more or less economically self-sufficient (at least in staples), thereby in varying degrees relating local communities socially and politically with the central authority of the polity. It is also readily understandable that public rituals performed at the dominant regional center before an assembled populace with easy access to that center (thanks to causeways or other types of transportation networks) could evidence the ideological sanctification that supports chiefly authority and testifies to the vital association of the rulership with ancestors and other supernatural beings and forces.

Comparable connections with political-ideological import could link the rulership of a central place with more distant foreign polities by means of maritime sea lanes. Thus Robertshaw notes the trade that linked Buganda to ports on the Indian Ocean, Allen describes the trade between Kedah and polities of East, Southeast and South Asia and the Middle East, and Bacus recounts the web of international trade that linked chiefs of complex polities in the Philippines with the imperial Chinese court. Bacus emphasizes that the prestigious foreign contacts and material goods (including especially glazed ceramics, cloth, and possibly beads) acquired by such ties served as essential symbols of chiefly status and potency for Philippine elites. It is likely that the same significance accrued to foreign trade goods acquired by the Kabaka of Buganda, the Kedah aristocracy, and autonomous peoples of the interior headwater regions of the northern Malaysian peninsula who supplied the forest products necessary for Kedah's overseas trade. Elsewhere I have argued at length (Helms 1993:Chps. 11 and 12) that the fundamental motives underlying elite acquisition of foreign goods in such circumstances and the prestige and elevated lifestyle that these fine goods and impressive alliances then conveyed should be understood less in political economical and more in political-ideological, indeed cosmological, terms. Wherever in the world they occurred, such ties and activities involving geographically distant peoples, places, and things attested to the association of the rulership with outside sources of cosmological potency and political legitimacy in exactly the same sense that ceremonial rituals at their own chiefly centers related aristocratic chiefs and other elites to intangible supernatural powers of the cosmological beyond.

Speaking of manifestations of aristocratic ties with supernatural authorities that are produced at the heart of the polity, McIntosh notes that the central leader of West African supralocal federations was recognized for his considerable ritual authority, for he enjoyed little secular influence. Indeed, the need to publicly evidence connections between aristocratic authority and legitimating cosmological forces may lie at the heart of urbanization, too (e.g., Ashmore 1991; Wheatley 1971), for traditional non-industrial cities may be interpreted as distinctive organizational means to situate at a single geographical locale a diversity of economic, social and ideological expressions of elite authority, all of which bespeak a fundamental legitimating sacrality. In this manner urbanism, whether in the tropics or elsewhere, not only provides qualitative evidence of elite superordinancy (as regional chiefly centers also do) but, by the sheer numbers or extent of diverse legitimizing activities, also creates a supernaturally potent concentration or "quantification" of aristocratic political-ideology.

Robertshaw's discussion of the factors underlying centralized authority in Buganda and Bunyoro also recognizes that a range of activities, including long-distance trade, warfare and control of labor, underwrote political developments. His analysis rests heavily on ecological conditions and on the economic ramifications of such enterprises. Yet he finds ecology and political economy in and of themselves insufficient to explain the nature—and development—of centralized authority in western Uganda. His analysis of the essential role of labor—in this case not abundant labor but a shortage of women's labor—in encouraging elite control of resources broadens from a strictly economic interpretation to explain that thousands of daughters or women captured in war were formally offered to the rulership as wives and maid servants by men seeking recognition and status from the king. The king, in turn, bestowed women, and their valuable labor, upon worthy supporters in recognition and appreciation of services rendered. Robertshaw comments on the low, commodity-like status accorded women who could be so moved about as "gifts." Yet I suspect that the acquisition and distribution of women by the Mukama and the Kabaka were also intended to be tangible manifestations of the ideologically-based obligation of the aristocracy, especially the king, to be responsible for the well-being of the polity and to serve as beneficent provider for the needs of the people.

Such ideological, indeed cosmological, functions lie at the heart of aristocratic rule in all centralized non-industrial societies, although they are often over-looked. Hocart pointed out many years ago that we err if we believe "that the primary function of a king is to govern, to be the head of the administration.. he is nothing of the kind. He is the repository of the gods, that is of the life of the group" and as such his fundamental public purpose is to confer upon the people the blessings of those gods (Hocart 1970:98-99). Indeed (returning to Buganda and Bunyoro), Robertshaw stipulates that elite exercise of ritual power as much as control of women's labor and of long-distance trade lay at the heart of kingship and chiefship in these polities. He points out that it was ritual power that may have initially attracted followers to join select kin groups who claimed exclusive fictive kinship with spirits associated with an earlier historical era; spirits that

were accessible at shrines that could become centers of ritual authority and of political-ideological legitimation for the kin groups that served as their guardians.

Elaboration upon Robertshaw's discussion of the value of women in Buganda/Bunyoro leads nicely to Michael Kolb's discussion of the role of pigs in the political economy and the political ideology of Hawai'i. Kolb finds political economy in and of itself insufficient to explain certain aspects of resource utilization and political development in the insular conditions characteristic of Hawai'i, which (in contrast to Uganda) offered few forms of tangible resources other than food to define high rank or legitimize political authority. Consequently, although mullet and especially domestic pigs eventually became important sources of protein, both were initially prized as metaphorically charged and ceremonially important high status items. As such, the value especially of pigs both for political economy and especially for political ideology in this highly centralized polity parallels the value accorded women in Buganda/Bunyoro and the comparable dual significance postulated for management of water resources by Classic Maya elite and by builders of Trowulan in Java. Ultimately I concur with Kolb that it is the cosmological and political-ideological significance accorded such "life-giving" resources as means to express and elaborate the legitimation of authority that gives these resources their greatest significance in the context of the development and expression of social and political complexity.

Successful institutionalized legitimation of centralized chiefly or royal rule and of the hierarchical superiority accorded aristocratic sectors, or estates (Nutini 1995) is perhaps the most essential factor in the development and operation of complex societies. Various papers (Roosevelt, Lucero, Bacus, Kolb, Redmond, Gasson and Spencer) have noted the importance of the public demonstration of elite legitimacy by religious rituals, public works at major political centers, the acquisition of foreign and/or locally produced "prestige" symbols, and other tangible paraphernalia of political ideology. But little has been said (though sometimes it has been implied in rather general terms) about the actual nature of the underlying concepts that inform aristocratic legitimacy. I would like to extend this discussion to briefly consider a few thoughts on this point since it underlies many of the themes presented in these essays, including those interesting cases, such as Roosevelt describes for portions of lower Amazonia and McIntosh for portions of Nigeria, where social and ideological rank and hierarchy seem to have existed in the absence of political centralization (see also Chernela 1993). In so doing I also wish to emphasize the general validity and great significance of Graham's insight that "rules" for the development of complexity are not about specific environmental settings and conditions but about power relationships, processes of transformation, and hierarchy wherever they are found.

Successful political legitimation in complex societies where the use of physical force is not a viable option for control rests on the co-option of political economy in the service of political ideology. In such societies the legitimating potency of ideology requires, first, the identification of a highly ranked aristocracy as a body of people—not just select individuals but an entire group or social sector—judged to be inherently and qualitatively different from ordinary people

(commoners) and, second, the definition of that qualitative contrast in cosmological terms. The heart of the matter lies in the identification and acceptance of rulers and other aristocrats as cosmologically other or outside beings, specifically as literally "living ancestors," and in the ability of the aristocracy to actively evidence contact with or access to eras or conditions or supernatural beings associated with cosmological origins or first creations, with beginnings, with Genesis.

Why should these associations be so all-important? In any cosmological system the fact of creation—the fact that living things and beings exist—is the one great truth that cannot be seriously questioned. The concept or reality of death can be challenged, waffled, even denied, but the surety that the universe was once originally created or formed and that things and beings continue to be created or born into the world cannot be denied or contested, and thus is truly (that is, sacredly) true. It is also accepted as a fundamental truth in non-industrial societies that nothing or nobody is self-founding; that people cannot come into being, have identity, or achieve any socially worthwhile (meaning morally acceptable) accomplishments entirely by themselves but only with the assistance of other, outside beings and of energizing cosmological powers that also exist beyond or outside themselves. Therefore it is essential that those who aspire to political leadership and who, in pursuit of that goal, wish to act as successful instigators of productive events and activities in the here-and-now somehow give evidence of contact with the necessary cosmological powers and outside beings. More specifically, if their labors and manipulations are to be considered not only successful but also legitimate, political personages must evidence association with the potent creativity of original, primordial beginnings, especially with the indisputable primacy of that which came first.

In contexts of cosmological creation and, by extension, political legitimation, things and beings that came into existence or achieved form or power first cannot be morally (lawfully) superceded or challenged by any prior thing or being, for such, by definition, does not exist. In addition, that which came first holds ultimate superiority, by definition, over things and beings that came into existence or achieved power later. Expressed in terms of political ideology, whatever persons or group can evidence the most direct, effective, and/or tangible contact with cosmological primacy cannot be legitimately superceded by the force or claim of any other group and, in addition, automatically stands in a position of hierarchical superordination vis-a-vis other sectors of society. These tenets, based on firm belief that cosmological principles are very real and factual, lie at the heart of political theory and action in kin-based societies (Helms 1998).

It is to publicly demonstrate legitimating and elevating precedence in effecting access to cosmological origins and to the supernatural power that permits success in earthly enterprise that politically ambitious persons and groups may proclaim direct descent from and/or impersonate the gods and also compete so vigorously, work so actively, and seek to monopolize or control so many different ideological, sociological, and material affairs. The range of such activities is broad, for they may include warfare, labor for all sorts of public works, access to water sources or other valued natural products, long-distance travel, the acquisition of valuable esoteric things,

contact with distant royal courts, the exercise of select arts and crafts (especially production of high-status goods), and study of the nature of the cosmos including concepts of time, astronomy, calendrics, and writing (Helms 1993). In addition, of course, privileged access to origins can also be evidenced by conduct of esoteric public ceremonies and rituals (including trance) directed toward ancestral forebears, supernatural deities, and the working of "nature" and the universe; by careful construction of the histories and genealogical connections of kin groups; and by the creation of tangible "relics," such as mummified remains of the most important dead (as Roosevelt describes for Santarem). For the same reasons special recognition and ritual potency are also accorded to things that are first: first animals killed in a hunt; first fruits of harvest; first-born children and all the initial events in their lives; first settlers in a region (as Robertshaw notes for Bunyoro and McIntosh for West African communities); those who are first to settle near a valued resource, such as springs and water holes (as Lucero postulates for the southern Maya lowlands), groves of fruitful trees, or the shrines of spirits (Robertshaw); and, by extension, to the descendants of these people.

Success in any and all such interests and activities not only provides the polity with immediate social or economic benefits or conditions some form of social or ecological adaptation but also, and most importantly, may be understood as specific ways of "proving," by virtue of their successful accomplishment, privileged access to origins by those who initiated or directed them or who are the descendants of those who did. For any particular complex society in any particular ecological setting, tropical or otherwise, the question for empirical investigation (as McIntosh has indicated with reference to West Africa, Robertshaw for the polities of western Uganda, and Graham in general discussion) concerns what particular activities, out of a range of possibilities, will be utilized by an actual or hopeful aristocratic group in their quest for such legitimating cosmological authority, why those particular activities rather than others were chosen at any particular time to evidence access to origins, and why such strategies succeeded or why they failed to express the cosmologically-derived hierarchical relationship that defines aristocrats and connects them with the creative power of the gods.

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